

Toward an Alternative Approach to Study Audience in Transitional Countries, the Case of Algeria

نحو مقارنة بديلة في دراسات الجمهور في البلدان الانتقالية، حالة الجزائر

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Abstract: This article is about an alternative approach to study audiences of global communication through the “old” and new globalized media, in a geographical and socio-techno-cultural local context with an emphasis on Algeria as an African, Arab, Muslim and especially a transitional country.

This essay attempts to examine a possible “*Alternative Approach to Study Audiences in Transitional Countries*” with special reference to Algeria; and rethinking audience behaviors in cyber spaces and in diverse real places, in those areas where new theoretical and methodological perspectives have already been developed.

Key words: Ethno-methodology, Techno-Cultural Context, Audience/User Ethnography

ملخص: تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية تصور مقارنة بديلة لدراسة جمهور الاتصال الشامل

من خلال وسائل الإعلام المعولمة "القديمة" والجديدة ، في سياق محلي جغرافي

وتكنولوجي-ثقافي محلي مع التركيز على الجزائر باعتبارها دولة أفريقية ، عربية ، مسلمة

وخاصة دولة انتقالية

يحاول هذا البحث دراسة "منهج بديل لدراسة الجمهور في البلدان الانتقالية" مع التركيز خاصة على الجزائر. وإعادة التفكير في سلوكيات الجمهور في الفضاءات الافتراضية الإلكترونية وفي أماكن حقيقية متنوعة ، في تلك المناطق التي تم فيها بالفعل تطوير منظورات نظرية ومنهجية جديدة من قبل باحثين ناشئين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ، السياق التكنولوجي الثقافي ، الجمهور / إثنوغرافيا المستخدم

Introduction: The term "*Transitional*" associated with "countries", refers, throughout this paper, to the newly emerged and/or re-emerged states which became independent from formal colonial powers in the post-war era, mainly located in the global south areas, i.e. Latin America, Asia and Africa.

They had different names in different historic and developmental stages and political situations, among which, "Third World Countries", "Developing Countries", "Non-Aligned Countries"...all of which are used as common synonyms for "Emerging States", whereas that might mean different things, especially when the developmental level is concerned.

These new societies aspire to reach high social life standards by trying to build-up their own socio-economic, political and cultural identities on basis different from the post-colonial and developmentalist thoughts.

One of the means seen to be efficient in restoring their own status were the mass media conceived, by western scholars[1] since 1950's, as a determinant factor to take-off toward socio-economic development; to industrialization and, thus to modernization.

Fifty years later on, no one of those overwhelming aims has been achieved and these societies have remained searching for their own identities in a very moving globalized and monolithic world armed by very sophisticated information and communication technologies.

These technologies have networked the world and disseminated hopes and values which could put peoples in these societies in a position of a permanent transition from traditional society to industrial and post-industrial one, then to information and knowledge society.

These states form an absolute majority in the United Nations Organization and its specialized agencies such as UNESCO, WIPO, WTO/TRIPS and the Convention on Biological Diversity; Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Folklore[2], and other related

world and international structures, but they cannot act to change their status-quo and contribute to the world building and its management. They still remain unable to use the opportunities offered by the new information technologies, including mass media of communication to mobilize their citizenship and guiding them to benefit and share progress and prosperity.

There is an enduring crisis in the governor-governed relationship. The challenge is still a dilemma, how to *Rethink Crisis and Change, to Use Media, especially new IT's and to share their benefits. One of the aspects of this crisis is that the globally networked distributive potential that digital communication technologies offer, may not only empower local users to develop their own practices, but also increase the powers of the Rulers to control and regulate these practices.*

It is believed that mass media as stimulus to calculated response do work under a set of social, cultural and spiritual conditions and values that vary from society to society and from time to time within the same society. Thus, the way to look at social change should vary from western societies to transitional ones. This is what is properly meant by the search for “An Alternative Approach to Study Audience Behaviors in Transitional Counties” and to look at the relationship between communication and citizenship in a given society.

Some new emerging scholars and media, and communication theorists from global southern countries are, in a large scale, experiencing their own findings and moving from West-centred research methods to focus more on the practices of everyday life, through many fields of academic and empirical inquiries and investigations in those societies[3].

The overall aim of this study is to make a particular sense of audience researches in transitional societies by looking into a variety of contemporary social themes and practices related to ethno-methodology, sociology, media and cultural studies, gender and family studies, also African and Arabo-Muslim studies in general.

Such issues are likely to have longer-term implications on media message reception, their perception, understanding and interpretation. They would also be the consequences of changes and accelerations in digitalization process, media policy and corporate strategies

Indeed, “western” approaches used in the area of empirical inquiries, field work and case report, from Hypodermic theory in the early 30’s to the selection of messages to be received; and interactivity approaches in late 80’s[4] and the mid of this first decade of the current century, do not appear to be totally apt to do the same jobs and the same tasks in different places, even though, transitional countries are more and more getting interconnected and interdependent regionally and globally.

This inadequacy might be due to various operating environments and socio-cultural differentiations. Even interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to examine contemporary technology and new media, especially the ethnographical methodology applied

to communication studies, are to be adapted to local situations, domesticated and maybe incorporated in local cultural contexts[5].

Axiomatically speaking, “westernized” theories and methods to approach social phenomena such as media audience behaviors, cannot totally be applicable with the same effectiveness, to peoples living under different social, economic, political and cultural conditions in the most of transitional countries.

Algeria as an African, Arab and Muslim society may best reflect in the form and content, the inadequacy of those approaches to look at the formation, characteristics and particularly to behaviors of the media audience as mass market, mass electorate and social subject to sociological inquiries as groups and individuals.

It might go beyond the evidence, that empirical audience researches in such societies could not, necessarily, lead to the same results and conclusions when following the same methodological procedures as in the western societies, because of social, educational, and cultural differentiations, even though audiences everywhere are exposed to the same global communication messages, via the same global communication media.

Such assumption was clearly highlighted in an attempt to focus on the implications in topical areas of particular importance on theoretical ideas and methodological procedures, by evaluating an ensemble of academic researches conducted at the Department of Information and Communication Sciences, University of Algiers, relating to the media audiences, during the two last decades, 1990-2009[6].

Determinant Move

Many inside and outside factors, have, since the early 90's, led to deep changes in the different daily life aspects including an urgent need to overcome challenges and meet new universal standards by reconsidering the whole of public affairs and to move from an authoritarian regime to a liberal orientation.

The most influential factors behind that move, could be the fall down of the defunct Soviet Union by the late 80's, the intense use of new technologies of information and communication (satellites, internet, digital phone..., globalization process) by the mid 90's, establishment of a sort of democratic system, the role to be played by the state in the local then global war on terror.

The above mentioned decades, conceived as a necessary period for socio-political and economic transition from oriented to liberal society, had witnessed an important developments in media and mass communication studies in general and in media audience in particular. This statement includes fundamental and applied researches that statically have moved from less than 1%, before 1990 to more than 25%, by 2009.

This new liberal orientation, generated by the globalisation process, and especially supported by the new information and communication technologies, seems to be the main factors leading to a new concentration of media studies on the audience as a mass market, mass electorate and as a main source of a public opinion of the civil society. That is to say, as mentioned by Dewey in the early beginning of the second half of the last century, “Mass, Audience, Public... There are only ways to say audiences are the people[7]”. Thus, audience studies reflect, in theory, the importance given to people by the business and the government.

Nevertheless, political and trade marketing considerations could not be the only factors to develop audience studies in the academic level. Quantitative and qualitative development in media education[8] and emergence of public opinion as an influential social power may have many things to do with the changes in audience studies in Algeria, as in many similar countries.

It appears from the whole audience studies, that researchers in this field of audience are often interested in the conventions of society, and the rules which people used to place themselves and others in social contexts, even though they usually do not refer to any ethnographical, anthropological or ethnological patterns.

Most of the conducted audience researches in question, use, at least, one of relevant ethnographical instruments of inquiries, but researchers do not recognize that qualification to used methods. The anthropology, ethnology and ethnography wherever used, even in biological sciences, were seen as suspected science, “dangerous” to the national unity, to the prevailing partisan ideology, and to the people cultural and religious harmonization. Seen as a part of “Colonialist science”[9], the use of ethnographic methods could not be the *sine qua non* in communication anthropological studies, even in this post-authoritarian period of transition.

In liberal societies, especially within the Anglo-Saxon sphere, audience studies have been, developed throughout the last century following the nature history of the media and the ever-sophisticated developments in information and communication technologies.

Based on theoretical and methodological developments, the different approaches to study the media audiences have included the most recent technological and political events in an attempt to understand, explain and interpret behaviours of different individuals and groups toward, for instance, the use of the Internet as a domestic technology besides the use of TV; and the war on terror, started in late 2001, after the famous attacks on the Twin Towers of the TWC in New York and the Pentagon Quarters in Washington.

Technically speaking, The Globalization process is, strongly, taking place through the generalization of TV and Radio Direct Broadcasting via Satellites (DBS) and the use of the

Internet[10], that is not, contrary to the first generation of new technologies thought, a monolithic or placeless ‘cyberspace’; rather, it is numerous new technologies, used by diverse peoples, in diverse real-world locations, for diverse purposes.

The assumption that ethnographical methodology to study the social and techno-cultural interactions in these “Cyberspace” or “virtual space”, created by the new domestic communication technologies, may come from the premise that one cannot understand the one without the other.

It might also be relevant to this assumption that ethnomethodology, as a branch of social sciences, is concerned with exploring how peoples act toward and interact with the world around them, and make sense of realities.

But it is not designed to provide people with judgments on human behavior or its causes, but rather to explain how people interact with each other and with society at large in a given socio-cultural context. The topic of study is the social practices of real people in real settings, and the methods by which these people produce and maintain a shared sense of social order[11].

With these new communicational contexts, many people engage in a small degree of ethnomethodology every day, even though they are not always aware of it. Usually parents explaining concepts to children, think about the way in which children approach the world and process information to put the concepts in terms children will understand. It is, thus, concerned with public social knowledge and concepts which are widely understood.

Interpreting Global Messages

It seems that a suitable approach to study the media global audience behaviours starting from local communities, may have many things to do with this ethnographical approach in use since 1980’s, when it started focusing on TV viewing, on domestic technologies, on family dynamism and on social micro-analysis, although it had been already born in the 1960s and 70s where ethnographic research methods began to be widely employed by communication scholars[12].

This methodological approach which is seen as an alternative to the American Sociological approach to data analysis has become one of the most common methods for collecting data in direct, first-hand observation of daily participation, including participant observation, interviewing, which may include conversation with different levels of form and can involve small talk to long interviews.

Questionnaires can be used to aid the discovery of local beliefs and perceptions and in the case of longitudinal research, where there is continuous long-term study of an area or site, they can act as valid instrument for measuring changes in the individuals or groups studies.

It is argued that the nature of ethnographic inquiry demands that researchers deviate from formal and idealistic rules or ethics that have come to be widely accepted in qualitative and quantitative approaches in research, and many principles should be considered for observing, recording and sampling data.

Dealing with the global audience studies literature through the natural history of media researches and comparing it to the nature of the audience researches in Algeria, we advocate a comparative ethno-methodological approach and we suggest that there are lines of enquiry, linked to dimensions of new media use, that can be usefully pursued across a wide range of settings; and that there are issues about social transformations in new media contexts that generally concern social science and other communities.

In all our essays, we rarely address the question of whether the ethnographic findings are specific to a determinate area, or common to many areas. We simply do not have grounds for answering such a question. Only long-term inquiries could make senses of such conclusions, and this required time, efforts and funds that are usually unavailable at the right moment for the right searcher. Because scientific research is not a priority on the agenda of public authorities.

The experience on empirical audience research, especially data collection on audience behavior, according to western theories and practices, has shown that methodological tools such as questionnaires, focus groups, panels do not work in such socio-cultural and technological contexts.

Many factors may be responsible for this inadequacy among them: Absence of research tradition in such cultural spaces, people are not familiar with any data collection procedure that could be confused with police investigations, practice frequently used in non democratic societies to discover members opposed to totalitarian and dictatorial regimes, thus lack of confidence. The traditional and electronic illiteracy is also to be considered in this order of ideas; the questionnaire method instrument is to be reviewed in such educational and cultural context as well the groups focus in public places.

The ethno-methodological approach, as has been experienced, seems, thus, to be the most adequate method because of simple means of inquiry, especially the direct and participative observation that engage the researcher and overcomes the negativity and inactivity of questioned population, subject of scientific inquiries.

One of the conclusion achieved by the analysis of those audience studies, is a clear advocacy in favor of that alternative approach in the study of media audience in Algeria and similar transitional countries, because of many criteria that could be provided in these areas such as a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the reality from which field work contributes to our understanding of social-life and help to look if

there is an adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the audience.

But this call for long-term empirical and field works with adapted methodological instruments could not be made possible without colossal financial supports that are not affordable by fragile scientific communities in the most of transitional countries. In addition to the various obstacles previously mentioned, researchers have to approach audience behaviors of local communities in very antagonistic environments and complex socio-cultural and ethical communities' characteristics.

Local Audience Typology

The starting point of the proposed new approach, might be defining the components of the population under observation, and building up a sort of machinery to organize research work. For instance, a project of audience research based on ethno-methodological approach needs what could be called an *audience typology* includes a brief history of the culture, evidence of religion, language change, dialectic and spoken language, folk notions and habit of the people under study, a short analysis of statistical data, physical geography, communication instruments and so forth. The composition of such local audience typology varies from community to community and from time to time within the same community.

Indeed, a factual analysis of these components could lead to a better understanding, to more comprehension and to a factual interpretation of audience's responses to media messages received in such Technico-cultural and socio-economic operating environments.

It might be worth noting that, at least, five large distinctive local communities live in Algeria on one million and a half square kilometers with a total population of 35.6 million citizens, out of them three quarters share one quarter of the superficies situated in the north along the sea coast of 1,600 kilometers (994.19 miles).

According to the 2009 general census, the population belonging to these "micro-societies" could be calculated on the basis of administrative districts where the majority of each community is known to live:

Arabs and/or "Arabized Tamazight": (About 25 millions) living in the north, high geography plateau and south, Muslim believers, Arabic and Algerian dialectic spoken language, **kabyles** (more than 4 millions), Berber of the middle north coast and Djurdjura Mounts, the whole district of Tizi-Ouzou, Bejaia, and partially districts of Bouira, Boumerdes, and El-Bordj, **Chawia** (nearly 3 millions), branch of Berber living in the region of Aures Mountain, notably, Batna, Khenchla, Oum-El-Bouagui and partially Tebessa and Biskra, **Touareg** (about one million), or Blue men living in the Big Sahara of the extreme south, Tamenrast, Ilizi and partially Ouergla and Adrar. **Mozabites** (more than half million), a small community living in a closed city of Gardaia, but culturally and religiously more conservative, powerful and influential on its members even living outside the area of their

“Holly city”. There exist other small communities throughout Algeria but without notable influence on social and communicative behavior of their members.

Conclusion

Commonly speaking, it appears that some communities have their preferable satellite TV channels, programs and languages: French channels probably for the majority of ‘Modern’ Kabyles and others, Arab and Arabic TV for Arabs, most the Chawia and conservative Kabyles, Tamazight TV, Religious channels for Mozabites and Touareg and other Kabyles. This statement of common sense remains fertile terrain of empirical inquiries

Some academic essays have shown that differences could be observed between groups and between individuals within the same community according to demographic characteristics: age, gender, education, social class, and so forth. The mode of family viewing, the decision making, the relationship female/male, adults/teenagers, the manner to interpret messages and build-up social meaning to be incorporated in local values, traditions, and habits...are to be thoroughly examined.

An analysis of the way these micro-societies and other local communities in others countries, might help all peoples to work together and reach a state of common understanding. Ethnomethodology can also be useful during cultural exchanges in which people have difficulty understanding the cultural norms of the people they are trying to work with.

We understand that everything is open to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings. The ability of the field researchers to take notes and observe varies, and therefore, what is depicted is not the whole picture of the reality and truth. But we should acknowledge that no one of the approaches used in social sciences could reach the absolute truth about everything. The ethno-methodological one has the merit to follow the order of public or popular knowledge.

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* - Initially this was a title of a paper project prepared, but not presented to Braga IAMCR Conference 2010 held in Portugal, July 19-22, 2010.

[1] - The main Western Media Theorists at that time including Schramm W., Lerner, Peterson, Siebert F.S...

[2] - UNESCO= United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization

- WIPO= World Intellectual Property Organization

- TRIPS /WTO= Trade Related Intellectual Property S of the World Trade Organization.

[3] - Among them professor Abderrahmane Azzi, *The Value Determinism Theory in Media*, <http://sites.google.com/site/valuemediadeterminismtheory/home>

[4] -David Morley had in « *Family Television 1986* », changed the strategy of inquiry in audience studies from the Effect Paradigm to the reception Paradigm, where the family became an environment to produce social meaning of messages.

[5] - Ali Kessaissia, *Theoretical and Methodological Bases of Reception Studies: An Analytic and Critical Study on the Nature of the Audience Researches in Algeria*, Faculty of Politics and Information Science, University of Algiers, 2007, <http://fspi.ahlamontada.net/montada-f68/topic-t162.htm>

[6]- Ali Kessaissia, op.cit. p.9

[7] -Dewey J., *the Public and its Problems*, Holt Rinehart, NY, 1972.

8- currently, there are 39 institutes of higher media education through 52 universities, instead of one high school of journalism in the 60 and 70's

9 - Politically criminalized, anthropology department was closed in the seventies even though the University of Algiers, one of first African universities, was specialized in that discipline since its creation in 1909.

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هذا الفضاء الافتراضي خاص بدراسات